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UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.







REPORT
OF THE
ICELANDIC COMMITTEE
FROM WISCONSIN
ON
THE CHARACTER AND RESOURCES
OF
ALASKA.



WASHINGTON:
GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE.
1875.

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REPORT OF THE ICELANDIC COMMITTEE FROM WISCONSIN ON THE CHARACTER AND RESOURCES OF ALASKA.

DECEMBER 15, 1874.

To his Excellency ULYSSES S. GRANT,
President of the United States :

SIR: The committee of Icelanders, who were deputed by the Icelanders of Wisconsin to examine Alaska, with a view to a settlement therein, beg to submit to your Excellency the following report :

We, first of all, would thank your Excellency with all our hearts for the kindness you have shown the Icelanders in granting their request, that they might be afforded facilities by your Government for making this examination. We offer you thanks in behalf of all the countrymen of ours who deputed us to go. Icelanders will not forget your Excellency's kindness.

After a voyage of twenty-four days we sighted Kadiak Island on October 9, of which the tops of the mountains were covered with last year's snow, and appeared to us much like the mountains of Iceland, especially on the northern and eastern coasts of Iceland. Proceeding toward the mainland, up Cook's Inlet, we saw great forests on the western shore of the inlet. On the mountains here we saw comparatively much less snow ; and there is also very little lowland on that side of the inlet. Farther up, and approaching Saint Nicholas, we saw a fine-looking country, covered with forests on both sides of the inlet, but with more lowlands on the eastern than on the western side.

On October 15 we went on shore at Fort Nicholas, and were kindly received by the agent in charge of the Government buildings, who also gave us useful information, he being an old resident. Here salmon are plenty in the rivers and lakes, and they are also very large. The agent told us that once he had in one hour caught sixty-three salmon, of which the biggest weighed ninety-five pounds, but the average weight was fifty-two and one-quarter pounds. Others told us the same. One day we went to the Kakno River, which flows south of Fort Nicholas, to a spot where it had last summer overflowed its banks, and there had, consequently, been pools formed in the low places, and afterward the pools had dried up, and heaps of dead salmon lay there so that it was half up to our knees wading through them. Several of the ship's officers also saw this. Winter here begins in the middle of November and ends in the middle of March. A Russian, who had lived in Alaska some twenty years, told us that cabbages, potatoes, and other garden vegetables were the only things that had been sown here ; but he said that no one had ever tried to sow anything else. He told us that about forty miles south there was a settlement called Noodshick, (Munina,) where rye was raised. The first morning we were on shore the thermometer stood, at half past six o'clock, eighteen degrees above zero, Fahrenheit.

We explored first in an easterly direction ; we passed through rolling and hilly country, covered with thick forests ; the soil was everywhere mossy, with very little grass, but much heather and many bushes. The trees are high, from seventy to eighty feet, and two feet in diameter ; they are mostly spruce. Farther from the coast we found swamps ; we think these could be easily drained, and they would then become good grass-land.

Afterward we went in a northerly direction from Fort Nicholas. We found there a drier soil, more grass, and forests of larger trees. We found in several places grass breast-high. On that day we came across much land of which the soil was composed of vegetable matter, being very rich and fertile, and from one to one and one-half feet deep; beneath this comes a layer of black mold from six inches to a foot deep, and slightly mixed with fine sand. Next below this is a layer of red loam, which seems to be impregnated with iron, and the water which runs through it has a strong taste of iron. Under this layer is sand, and under the sand a sort of sandstone, beneath which comes clay. We could observe these layers along the beach, and on the banks of the streams. In very many places, indeed, almost everywhere along the beach, are layers of coal and of *surturbrand*.

As far as we can judge, the quality of the land seems best nearest the coast, and again, according to what we could learn from others, on the other side of the marshes and nearest to the mountains, where the grass is said to grow from five to six feet high. On the western side of the inlet there is much less lowland, and we all think we have good reason to believe that the land is drier and better on that side in many places; but as there was no one on board who knew the landing-places there, we were not able to go over.

It is said there are no fish in the inlet itself, and we think the cause is that so many rivers pour into the inlet, some of them glacial torrents, which carry with them sand and loam; and that, as the bottom of the inlet is muddy, the water becomes turbid in stormy weather, and this drives the fish away. Salmon are very plenty in all the rivers and lakes during the season. Game was scarce in the immediate neighborhood of Fort Nicholas, excepting wild geese, of which there was an abundance. It is said there is a great deal of game in the mountains east of the lowlands; bears, foxes, land-otters, ermine, marten, and sable, and the like.

Our general impression of Cook's Inlet is that, although we would earnestly recommend our countrymen to settle there *later*, it will not be best adapted to a colonization *direct* from Iceland, because it would be more difficult to begin there than on Kadiak. The chief means of subsistence for the settlers would for the first year necessarily be salmon; and, in order to make the most of the salmon-fishing, the settler should be there in April or May, and this would be next to impossible if one came direct from Iceland. For a second reason, although there is no doubt that stock-raising can succeed well in this portion of Alaska after a time, still, the soil here needs previous preparation in order to support large herds. As the summer in that portion is said to be very warm, (112° Fahrenheit have been reached,) and as the rain is comparatively much less abundant north of the sixtieth parallel, it can hardly be doubted that agriculture will be profitable here. The winter is often very cold, (the temperature falls sometimes to 40° below zero, Fahrenheit,) and the snow falls six or seven feet deep in the low country, and twelve or fourteen feet on the mountains.

But should Icelanders settle at Kadiak Island, for example, to begin with, we think it not only likely, but quite certain, that an offshoot of the colony would find it advantageous to settle from there at Cook's Inlet.

The country about Cook's Inlet is also not so well known, and needs to be explored in order for us to become acquainted with its natural resources, and this will be done as soon as Kadiak shall be settled by a civilized people.

After a three days' voyage from Cook's Inlet, we arrived, on the twenty-fourth of October, at Kadiak Island. The custom-house officer received us kindly, and offered us house-room, as also for the two of us who were to remain all winter at Saint Paul.

We explored the peninsula which runs northeast from Saint Paul, and also the country north of the peninsula, round Devil's Bay, where we found the ground mostly covered with excellent and heavy timber, especially spruce and pine, and, where there was an open space, there was an abundance of grass, high, and of good quality, and the soil was rich. There are many lakes and streams, all full of salmon and different kinds of trout. Next we examined the mountains in the neighborhood of Saint Paul, and the country on the north of the mountains, about Chiniak Bay; and the mountains are mostly like each other. There is hardly any lowland, but the mountains are covered with birch-trees and with green grass to their summits: there are no land-slides, and rock is rare. We traveled a long way in a westerly direction on the mountains, and Jón Olafsson went farther northwest until he came to Marmot Bay. The most inviting country was there, and excellent pasturage, but the forests there were smaller than farther south. We visited the islands around Saint Paul, and found them nearly all inhabitable. The timber on Woody Island is bigger than any we have seen in Wisconsin. Goats run on the islands without any care being taken of them. The whites who have cattle feed them in the winter, but the natives do not feed their cattle at all, being too lazy to cut hay for them.

We crossed over Chiniak Bay, and landed on the northern side of Cape Greville, where Paul Björnson went in a westward direction along the bay, but the two others went across the peninsula, and afterward around it, in an easterly direction. A large and beautiful grass country was there, and *some* forests. Here we found some wild rye, (*elymus*.)

East of the one hundred and fifty-third meridian, Kadiak Island is covered with forests; but there is hardly any forest to the west of that line. Pasturage is said to be excellent all over the island along the coast; but the upland is said to be wet and unproductive; still, there is no doubt of there being pasturage for a long way in from the coast, in the many valleys leading up from the bays.

The salmon-fishing at Kadiak is about as good as at Cook's Inlet, except that the salmon are smaller. In a little while the sailors from the Portsmouth caught over fifty in one of the rivers, although it was at a time out of season, and they got these by catching them with their hands, or by striking them on the head with a stick, or by shooting them as they leaped out of the water. There is an abundance of cod-fish and halibut all the year round; and we caught any number of them without a boat, fishing from the wharf. We will mention here that the Icelanders cure fish better than any other people in Europe. And I, Jón Olafsson, have in Norway heard merchants who had traded in Spain with Icelandic and Norwegian fish, say they could not sell the Norwegian article in the market until the Icelandic fish had been sold out. Many persons in Iceland also well understand the art of smoking salmon, and preserving it in tin cans.

There is considerable game on Kadiak, both birds and other creatures. Fur-seal and sea-otter are caught not far from the island.

There is no navigable river in Kadiak, by reason of rapids; but many of them have sufficient water-power to drive machinery.

At Woody Island the ice company raises oats; but they use them in the same manner as frequently is seen in California; cutting off the tops and feeding them to the cattle like hay. Thus, not much care is

taken in raising them; but still they get almost ripe. Potatoes grow and do well, although the natives have not the slightest idea of how they should be cultivated; which goes to show they would thrive excellently, if properly cared for. Cabbage and turnips, and the various garden vegetables have great success. And, to judge from the soil and the climate, there is *prima facie* no reason why everything that succeeds in Scotland should not succeed in Kadiak.

Pasture-land is so excellent on Kadiak, and hay-harvest so abundant, that our countrymen would here, just as in Iceland, make sheep-breeding and cattle-raising their chief means of livelihood. The quality of the grass is such that the milk and the beef and mutton must be excellent; and we also had an opportunity to try these at Kadiak. In time, the Icelanders would in Alaska bring to the American market these articles in great abundance and of good quality.

When we compare what we have found about Alaska in books, especially in Lieutenant Dall's book, with what we have ourselves now seen and informed ourselves about, we feel convinced that Dall's description of that land is correct in all essential matters. Kadiak Island is excellently fitted for stock-raising; the fisheries are abundant all the year round; and there is plenty of timber for fire-wood, for house-building, and boat-building everywhere east of the one hundred and fifty-third meridian; and it is only a little distance to the Kenai peninsula, where timber suitable for building large ships grows. The island has in nearly every respect advantages over Iceland, and the climate, especially, is milder in the winter-time without being warmer in summer, and summer is a great deal longer than in Iceland.

We, therefore, do not hesitate to recommend those of our countrymen who are minded to emigrate that they come hither if they can, and we do this after a minute and conscientious deliberation, in the firm belief that it will be for their advantage, as the land seems in every respect well adapted to them, and answers completely all our expectations.

Agriculture is wholly untried here, so that it is not entirely certain how far the country is adapted thereto; but this circumstance has for the Icelanders, who at home are not accustomed to agriculture, not the same importance which it has for people of many other nations, who will yet for many years be able to find lands to their taste not yet settled much farther east.

We cannot, therefore, do otherwise than express the hope that the American Government will do all that lies in its power to encourage the immigration of our countrymen to Alaska, as the land seems to have been created just for them. In like manner we think that men of our race are the best adapted, or perhaps the only men adapted, to settle and cultivate that country, and to utilize the natural resources with which it is furnished.

Both for the reasons above stated, and also for other reasons, founded not merely on physical advantages, but which we shall not detain your excellency in specifying, we are convinced that Alaska will suit our countrymen better than any other land on earth.

We have the honor to be, your Excellency's obedient servants,
JÓN ÓLAFSSON,

(Who also is authorized to subscribe the names of the absent committeemen.)

ÓLAF ÓLAFSSON.
PAUL BJÖRNSSON.

NEW YORK, December 15, 1874.

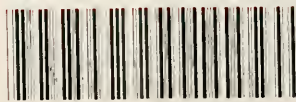
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